



Appliqué:

In the era before screen printing, the process by which all flags were made, that is, by cutting out individual pieces of differently-coloured fabrics and then tediously sewing them together by hand, possibly with some embroidery added. Nowadays, the labour-intensive appliqué process is generally reserved for making highly decorative or ceremonial flags, such as those that one often sees arranged behind national leaders, because modern flag printing processes handle a multitude of colours and the most intricate of patterns, churning out remarkable flag designs on an assortment of incredibly durable fabrics. Even for sewn flags, manual labour is giving way to computer-controlled laser cutters for flag fabrics, and soon, perhaps, even to automated stitching.

Charge (sometimes less accurately called a 'device'):

Any emblem, shape, or object that has been superimposed on the 'field' of a flag (see further below). For example, the blue fields of the current Australian and New Zealand flags are 'charged' with the Southern Cross.

Defacement:

When used for flags this term has nothing to do with spoiling or vandalising, but only means that a new element has been added to an existing flag. For example, the basis of the current New Zealand and Australian national flags is the British blue ensign, a flag with a plain blue field and a Union Jack canton. The New Zealand and Australian flags, then, are comprised of British blue ensigns that have been 'defaced' with the Southern Cross.

Dexter:

A term derived from heraldry, and one that depends on relative point-of-view. Graphic depictions of flags conventionally show their 'obverse' side (explained further below). The hoist edge of a flag that is depicted in this way will be dexter, or 'to the left'.* The term may also be used to refer to the leftmost elements of charges or defacements when viewing *either* side of a flag. Also see 'sinister', further below.

Field:

The background-area colour of a canton (or quadrant), a hoist, or a fly, sometimes also called the 'ground'. For the current Australian and New Zealand national flags, for example, the field for all three of those areas is blue.

Fimbriation:

Broadly speaking, any narrow strip, border, or outline of a high-contrast colour separating two other colours of lesser contrast, or even two identical colours. More generally, a narrow strip, border, or outline of white or gold between two darker colours, used to emphasise their separation. Fimbriation may also sometimes be called 'metal', following heraldic conventions, or even 'argent' if it is silver or grey, although argent as a colour is not limited to fimbriation.

Obverse:

The side of the flag for which a viewer sees the flagpole or hoist edge on the left*. Conventionally thought of as the 'front' side of the flag, and conventionally the side that is seen in graphic representations of the flag.

Reverse:

The side of the flag for which a viewer sees the flagpole or hoist edge on the right*. Conventionally thought of as the 'back' side of the flag, and usually only seen in graphic representations when it somehow differs from the obverse, as in multi-layer flags with different or specially-oriented reverse-side charges and/or defacements.

Sinister:

The opposite of dexter. Another term from heraldry, and like 'defacement', one without negative connotations. For a depiction of the obverse of a flag, the fly edge will be sinister, or 'to the right'.* The term may also be used to refer to the rightmost elements of charges or defacements when viewing *either* side of a flag.

Vexillology (having the letters v, x, and y, a good word for Scrabble):

The scholarly study of all aspects of flags. The term was coined in 1957 by Whitney Smith (1940-2016), from an amalgam of Latin and Greek roots. Smith sometimes took a bit of flak for this 'mismatch' of roots, and at least once he even apologised for it, although perhaps with his tongue in his cheek. After all, such '[hybrid words](#)' are far more common than one might think. Smith pioneered the field of vexillology, advancing it from its previous status as a mere sub-category of heraldry, and he made a life-long career of it, establishing [the Flag Research Centre](#), writing countless flag-related books and articles, founding several vexillological organisations, designing many notable flags, and publishing 233 issues of the first periodical journal of vexillology, "[The Flag Bulletin](#)", which had a fifty-year publication run. Like all fields of study, vexillology has had its share of dilettantes and self-proclaimed experts, including some who pedantically evaluate every flag design against an arbitrary set of rules for 'good and bad'. These officious, 'good flag design activists' often refer to themselves as 'vexillonnaires', and they sometimes even award themselves [pretentious honours](#). Sadly, undue deference is often given to the opinions of vexillonnaires, so that they are apt to be put in charge of 'guiding' new flag design contests into selecting what they think are the 'best' flag designs, when in fact average citizens are just as likely to know good flag designs when they see them, if not more so due to a lack of preconceived biases. Flag design, incidentally, is also called vexillography, and flag designers are also called vexillographers. Wikipedia has [an interesting article about vexillography](#), which includes links to articles about several famous vexillographers.

* Passages above that are followed by an asterisk describe the more conventional relationship between the obverse or 'front' side of a flag and the position of its hoist at the left, which is referred to as 'dexter hoisting'. For certain flags, and perhaps especially for those that are in accordance with 'Arabic' traditions, such as [the flag of Saudi Arabia](#), the position of the hoist is conventionally at the right of the obverse or front side of the flag, which is referred to as 'sinister hoisting'.